Higher Education and Employability of Graduates: will Bologna make a difference?

ELINOR EDVARDSSON STIWNE
Linköping University, Sweden
MARIANA GAIO ALVES
Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT This article focuses on the relationship between higher education, employability of graduates and students’ satisfaction with their studies, drawing on European statistics, as well as on data collected at national and/or institutional level in Portugal and Sweden. Employability has been understood as a measure of higher education quality and one of the issues at stake within the Bologna process. Having this in mind, the authors try to answer three main questions: What was the baseline situation in the two countries concerning higher education systems, enrolment in higher education and graduate employability before 2007? Were students satisfied with their studies and professional job situation before 2007? Which trends is it possible to envisage – tendencies of enrolment, mobility, employment – after 2007? Data analysed allows these questions to be answered and provides an important comparison due to the fact that both countries started to implement the Bologna structure in 2007 and have quite different educational systems. The authors discuss if 'Bologna' makes a difference regarding graduate employability and students’ satisfaction with their studies, and how the differences between the countries can be understood.

Introduction

Higher education in European countries has faced several reforms, before the implementation of the Bologna structure, as well as during the process of establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by the year 2010. The main goals have been to establish a common structure with three levels and a common credit system, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) system, as well as promote mobility and employability among graduates. In April 2009 the ministers responsible for higher education in the 46 signatory states met to take stock of the results of the Bologna process so far and to set the priorities for the next decade (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué: European Commission [EC], 2009a). They state that although many goals have been achieved they urge for better commitment to the implementation of the goals among higher education institutions and they argue that investment in higher education must be a priority for the next decade if Europe is to be a ‘Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative’. The ministers’ top three priorities for the next decade are:

- the social dimension – national targets for widening participation;
- making lifelong learning (LLL) an integral part of higher education systems;
- fostering employability – to encourage work placements to be embedded in study programmes.

In this article we will focus on the issue of graduate employability, related to the Bologna process. Portugal and Sweden are used as examples of countries of about the same size, population and general employment structure, but with different educational systems within the EHEA. Located in quite distant geographical areas within Europe, the two countries are also quite different in their traditions in the field of education and in the average levels of education of the population.
Higher Education and Employability of Graduates

It is within this context that this article intends to contribute with a critical discussion on the issue of graduates’ employability and the relation between students’ satisfaction and employability. The question to be raised is if, and how, Bologna matters in the process of making graduates employable. In this article we will present data about graduate employability and students’ experiences of the quality and relevance of their education for their career and job satisfaction after graduation. This will be discussed with reference to what has happened in the global economy from 2008.

Background to the Bologna Process in Portugal and Sweden

Although the Bologna declaration was signed in 1999 the Bologna structure was not implemented in Portugal and Sweden until 2007. In 2009 there are as yet no statistical data on the employability of graduates who enrolled in the new Bologna-type structure programmes. Being so, the article draws on data from national and local surveys in Portugal and Sweden. These surveys allow us to understand the situation in the two countries during the time span 1997-2007 (before and during the first phase of the Bologna process) and to anticipate challenges that Bologna may involve concerning employability of higher education graduates.

The high priority given to a change in focus of higher education, from course content to learning outcomes, and a focus on employability in all degrees, at bachelor, master and doctoral levels, has engaged and upset management and academic staff. One reason for that has been the conception that when higher education institutions are going to implement the political goals of the Bologna process the traditional academic ideal and image of ‘the University’ is contested when external actors call for influence on the design of study programmes, research strategies and the management of the universities. Välimaa & Hoffman (2008) argue that the growing importance of knowledge, research and innovation for the global economy is changing the social role of universities.

The human capital aspect is seen as essential in the European Union where knowledge society discourse strongly emphasizes employment-related topics and themes. However, inside higher education institutions the discourse of the knowledge society challenges universities to develop and to adopt new collaborative teaching practices in the training of professionals. (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008, p 279)

It is not only traditional ideals and images that are challenged, but also the concept of knowledge. It is argued that the Bologna process contributes to a conception of ‘knowledge’ as a product to be capitalised, with a content and form that is negotiated in a context where different actors strive for power, status and financial positions (Czarniawska & Genell, 2002). Consequences at programme and course level are that in order to survive in the national and international competition for students, they have to be on the lookout for what attracts and interests the students, and adjust their curriculum to this. The images of the students thirsting for knowledge and the lecturers filling these vessels with knowledge are challenged by an image of the students as consumers who are looking for the cheapest but tastiest and most easily digested product on the market. These images, or maybe sagas, are contested by student evaluations indicating that students look at their education as an investment for the future, they expect ‘value for money’, and a diploma is their key to the job market.

Brown (2003) argued that ‘acquisitive learning’ is what defines the purpose of education, indicating that students focus on learning that is necessary for them to pass examinations and get a diploma. This challenges the academic ideal of ‘inquisitive learning’ (Brown, 2003) which is not consumer driven and involves an intrinsic interest in knowledge and learning for its own sake, for ‘bildung’, personal growth and development.

Educational Level and Employability in Portugal and Sweden

Before discussing the relation between graduate employability and higher education in the two countries, related to the Bologna process, we will give some background data from Eurostat (2009) about educational level and employment in 2007, when the Bologna structure was implemented in Portugal and Sweden.
Table I. Percentage of graduates from tertiary education in different age groups in EU-27 countries, Portugal and Sweden.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduates from tertiary education</th>
<th>25-34 year-old</th>
<th>35-44 year-old</th>
<th>45-64 year-old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU-27</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data show that, in 2007, the overall higher educational level in Sweden was above the average for the 27 EU member states while in Portugal this level was below the European average. Data from Eurostat (2009) indicate a high correlation between the educational background of parents and the level of education of their children. The percentage of individuals who had completed tertiary education varied depending on the educational background of their parents. In the 25-34 age group, 26% of students with parents with low educational background in Sweden and 15.4% in Portugal graduate; 59.1% of students with parents with high educational background in Sweden and 61.4% in Portugal graduate. Within this context, a question to address is if, and how, the Bologna structure will impact the social dimension and reproduction of social capital in different countries. However, for the purpose of this article about graduate employment we now focus on a summary of data about general employment and unemployment rates.

Table II. General employability rates 1997 and 2008 in EU-27 countries, Portugal and Sweden.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU 27</td>
<td>60.7 %</td>
<td>65.9 %</td>
<td>51.4 %</td>
<td>59.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>65.7 %</td>
<td>68.2 %</td>
<td>56.5 %</td>
<td>62.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>69.9 %</td>
<td>71.5 %</td>
<td>67.2 %</td>
<td>71.8 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The general employment rates within the EU-27 countries have risen between 1997 and 2008, even among females. The employment rates in Sweden and Portugal are above the EU-27 averages, and Sweden stands out with a high employment rate for females.

If we look at the unemployment rates we can see that these have slightly increased between 2008 and 2009.

Table III. Unemployment rates May 2008 and May 2009 in EU-27 countries, Portugal and Sweden.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU 27</td>
<td>6.8 %</td>
<td>8.9 %</td>
<td>15.0 %</td>
<td>19.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>7.7 %</td>
<td>9.3 %</td>
<td>15.7 %</td>
<td>20.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>5.6 %</td>
<td>8.9 %</td>
<td>17.4 %</td>
<td>27.3 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The general unemployment rates in the EU-27 countries show that young adults (15-24 years old) are a vulnerable group in all EU-27 countries, but that Sweden stands out with extremely high and rising unemployment rates, compared to Portugal, which is more in line with the average EU-27 countries. A question to be asked is if this is related to the educational level or to other structural aspects of the labour market.

To summarise: when the implementation of the Bologna process started in Portugal and Sweden, in 2007, the general educational level was above the average EU-27 level in Sweden and below the average in Portugal. In both countries there was a high correlation between the educational background of parents and their children’s level of education. In Portugal a higher proportion of children with highly educated parents graduate than in Sweden. In Portugal and Sweden, as well as in the EU-27 countries as a whole, the group of young adults are the most vulnerable group when it comes to unemployment rates. The most extraordinary figures relate to
Sweden, where the general educational level is high, the general employment level is high, especially among females, but where the unemployment rates among young adults are far above the average in the EU-27 countries.

Higher Education in Portugal and Sweden

Portugal and Sweden are two quite small European countries, with very different educational systems and social and economic structures. In Portugal higher education is provided at universities (universidades) and polytechnics (institutos politécnicos). What differentiates the two types of institutions is mainly that universities cover more fields and faculties and provide doctoral education within one or more areas of science. In terms of level, education corresponding to the Bachelor’s and Master’s is available either in universities or polytechnics. Since their appearance in the 1970s polytechnics have been considered as higher education institutions that should be directly linked to the needs and demands of the social and economic environment where they are located, and the development of research has been less promoted in these institutions, being seen as a major activity within universities.

In 2007 Portugal had 15 public universities and 13 public polytechnics, and most higher education students (75%) were studying in public institutions in 2007-08 (National Report for Portugal, 2007). Only around a quarter of students are in private schooling. The Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (MCTES) is responsible for authorising all the courses, degrees and functioning of all higher education institutions (the public and the private ones). Public higher education institutions are funded by the government and students pay tuition fees according to the amount that each institution decides up to a maximum allowed for the first cycle of 920 euros per academic year in universities and 850 euros per academic year in polytechnics.

Swedish higher education is provided at universities (universitet) and university colleges (högskolor). Sweden has a unitary system for higher education and both universities and university colleges follow the same regulations. Both offer general academic degrees, professional degrees and/or degrees in the arts but universities cover more fields and faculties and provide doctoral education within one or more areas of science. In 2007 Sweden had 14 public universities, 4 university colleges and 3 ‘private’ institutions with PhD education and 11 university colleges (polytechnics), 7 schools of fine arts and 10 ‘private’ institutions without PhD education (National Report for Sweden, 2007). Five university colleges have been assigned a specific area of science in which they provide doctoral programmes (National Report for Sweden, 2007).

The Swedish National Agency of Higher Education (HSV) is authorised by the government to evaluate and carry through quality assessment of all institutions and to secure or deny them their certificates of examination in different subjects and study programmes. Universities are authorised to examine PhD students at all faculties/scientific areas. During 1997-2007 higher education institutions were funded by government and there were no tuition fees. The government gives a specific annual assignment to each institution, where it is specified how many graduates they are expected to produce in various scientific fields.

Graduate Employability and Students’ Satisfaction

A basic assumption in the Bologna process is that an increase in educational level in the population is a prerequisite for economic growth and job opportunities. Considering our main aims within the article and the baseline data on Portugal and Sweden we will address theoretical issues in order to analyse the concepts of ‘graduate employability’ and ‘students’ satisfaction’ in relation to the job market and job situation for young adults.

Graduate Employability

In the current discourses graduate employability is frequently understood as being the same as graduates’ establishment in the job market after graduation (Eurostat, 2009; HSV, 2005, 2007), although some researchers argue that graduate employability is ‘clearly not the same as graduate employment rates’ and instead should be defined as ‘suitability for graduates’ employment’ (Knight...
According to these authors, employability encompasses the combination of four aspects of higher education: ‘understanding of subject matter’ (propositional knowledge in the form of mastery of the subject matter of the degree), ‘skilful practices’ (these can be characterised as procedural knowledge), ‘efficacy beliefs’ (belief that one generally can make some impact on situations and events) and ‘metacognition’ (awareness of what one knows and can do, and of how one learns more) (Knight & York, 2004, p. 38). Implicit in their definition is the assumption that higher education can provide students with knowledge and skills that are applicable in academic as well as in non-academic contexts. Other assumptions of higher education are related to the concepts of ‘capitalisation of knowledge’, ‘credentialism’ and ‘students as consumers’. Tomlinson (2008) argues that there are two main competing interpretations of the relationship between grades/credentials and labour market outcomes, the human capital approach and the credentials approach. In human capital theories higher education is viewed as an investment that yields both social and private returns (Ashton & Green, 1996). Both society and the individual benefits from this investment and individuals base their participation on rational choices (Abell, 1991). From a credentialist approach it is argued that an increase in credentials and graduates does not add value to individuals’ human capital, it just generates a growing pressure for individuals to acquire further credentials to access jobs (Collins, 1979; Tomlinson, 2008).

Employers pay less importance to academic credentials and more importance to personal attributes and skills when the supply of graduates increases (Brown et al, 2001). Thus employers define ‘employability’ as aspects of ‘behavioural competence’ and the students’ capacities to show a range of personal, performative and organisational skills rather than the possession of traditional academic, theoretical knowledge and skills. These different aspects of the meaning of the concept of ‘employability’ indicate that which definition of the concept will be adopted and implemented by students, employers and academic staff in the future will impact on higher education institutions.

Rhoades & Slaughter (2006) challenge empirical research on the relationship between higher education and work (i.e. Teichler, 1998), arguing that there are some basic assumptions about work and employability that are never contested:

- work often equals private sector employment;
- work equals employment in large companies;
- education for work equals fitting in and assimilating to existing workplaces;
- preparing for work equals developing new job skills;
- work equals paid employment.

Their critical reflections call for more and better systematic analyses of research on employability as this will guide policy makers as well as education and training. Their argument is that this is necessary in order to avoid knowledge and education becoming commodities to be traded on a market and credentials a cultural capital to be invested in.

Within this broader sense of the concept we argue that the employability of graduates is the result of a complex set of interrelated factors comprising economic and professional contexts, individual trajectories and characteristics as well as teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Bearing this in mind we pointed out in previous work (M.G. Alves, 2005) the need to approach this field of research following a methodological and analytical strategy that allows us, on the one hand, to look at the interlocking of higher education, the world of work and employment as well as the graduates themselves and, on the other hand, to consider the trends and social and economic contexts that interfere in this interaction. As an example of this we have reflected on the paradox of the Swedish situation with high general educational and equality aspirations but with increasing difficulties for young adults to access the job market. In our view it is necessary to consider theoretical approaches that do not imply a direct link between education and employment (like human capital theories) and methodological approaches that differentiate between the meaning and consequences of education for different groups and individuals in different regional contexts.

There are some longitudinal studies showing how young adults experience higher education, their satisfaction with their studies as well as their future work in relation to their education.
Students’ Satisfaction

In 1999, 3000 students from 11 European countries were surveyed about the relationship between higher education and employment four years after graduation (Schomburg & Teichler, 2006). On average, the most important aspects for student satisfaction with their studies were contact with fellow students, course content, teaching quality and the variety of courses offered while the opportunity to participate in research projects received a low rating. The study also indicated that there were national differences, i.e. students from Scandinavian countries as well as the United Kingdom emphasised practical learning and facilities to a higher degree than students from southern Europe.

Garcia-Aracil (2009) presented a review of research about student and job satisfaction using survey data to identify what aspects of the academic environment had the highest influence on student satisfaction and student learning. On an aggregated level the results showed that women were less satisfied than men; the higher level of education the parents had (especially the mother) the more satisfied were the students; students with non-pecuniary motives were more satisfied than those who strived for money and status. After graduation, students who could apply the knowledge and competencies acquired during their studies in their present jobs were more satisfied with their studies than those who could not. Over-educated and under-educated students were far less satisfied with their studies than ‘matched’ students. A well-organised study programme with emphasis on practical knowledge as well as research, an emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning, good provision of work placement and good contact with fellow students contributed to high student satisfaction. The quality of teaching had greater impact on their satisfaction than overall practical learning. Mature students were more satisfied than very young students.

One conclusion drawn by Garcia-Aracil was that study satisfaction among students in different European countries was relatively stable, despite differences in educational systems and that study satisfaction was closely related to study expectations. Students expected more/better opportunities to participate in and influence their study situation and better communication with academic staff, and this was identified as the most challenging issue for higher education to deal with. The study showed that a good proportion of student satisfaction with their studies was related to factors other than the educational experience itself, i.e. work experiences, possibilities to apply knowledge and skills, and social and life experiences.

National Data on Graduate Employability in Portugal and Sweden 1997-2007

We have presented some background data on general employment and unemployment as well as data on the educational levels and educational systems in Portugal and Sweden. As we do not yet have data about the graduate employment of any ‘Bologna graduates’ in our countries, we have collected national data about graduate employment before 2007 as a baseline for analysis and discussion about the question if Bologna will make a difference for the future. The national databases are not compatible or comparable, but we have tried to map the national similarities and differences.

Portugal

Enrolment in higher education in Portugal had been sharply decreasing between 2002/03 (400,831) and 2006/07 (366,729), but it increased slightly during the first year of Bologna to 376,917 students in 2007/08 (GPEARI [Gabinete de Planeamento, Estratégia, Avaliação e Relações Internacionais (Planning, Strategy, Evaluation and International Relations Unit)], 2009a). This means that in 2007/08 around 31% of all people aged 15-24 in the country were in higher education (34% among women and 28.5% among men). Most of the students go into the public sector and to the universities, while private schooling accounts for around one-quarter (25%) of the students, and polytechnics for 37% of the students in higher education. Starting in 2006/07 there has been a national initiative to promote the entrance to higher education of adults over 23 years old and this accounts for 14% of students enrolling in higher education in 2007/08.

In Portugal most higher education students are national citizens, since the inflow of students from other countries is low. Regarding student mobility, a national survey conducted in 2006
(Martins et al, 2008) showed that only 7.8% of the Portuguese students had been abroad to study. These results are in line with a recent survey (EC, 2009b) indicating that student mobility in Portugal is lower than in other EU countries. In Portugal 53% of those interviewed in the European survey had never planned to study abroad, while the average in Europe was 41%.

Women represented 57% of students enrolled in higher education establishments in 2007/08, following a trend that we have been noticing over recent decades towards an increasing number of females studying in higher education. Nevertheless, in the Portuguese research work done on higher education graduates’ transition to work, women seem to experience more difficulties (they take on average more time to find a job and are more frequently unemployed or in an insecure situation in the job market) (M.G. Alves, 2005).

In Portugal data on employment of graduates is available through three different sources: (1) a national survey launched in 2001 (ODES [Observatório dos Diplomados de Ensino Superior (Observatory of Higher Education Graduates)], 2002), (2) national reports containing statistical information on higher education graduates who are registered as unemployed in the Employment Centres [1], and (3) surveys conducted by higher education institutions to collect information on the trajectories and pathways of their own graduates in the labour market. The national survey from 2001 was launched jointly by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science and Technology. The survey was conducted by a questionnaire to a sample of 10,000 graduates who graduated in the academic year 1994/95, covering all institutions and fields of study and focused on the monitoring of the graduates’ pathways during five years after their first degree (ODES, 2002). The results indicated that unemployment rates and insecure positions in the labour market tended to decrease, while the average salary increases, during the five-year period. One month after graduation 39% were unemployed compared to only 1.9% in 2001. Some 49% experienced an insecure position on the labour market one month after graduation but after three years this trend had begun to change and five years after graduation 22% experienced an insecure position. One month after graduation 57.2% had a salary below 750 euros per month, while in 2001, 56.5% earned at the maximum 1250 euros per month. As a whole 59.5% were satisfied with the way their professional pathway had evolved.

Another aspect that has to be considered is the fact that employability is linked to different factors such as gender, field of study and higher education institution of graduation. Among the graduates surveyed at a national level in 2001 the proportion of unemployed was greater among students from the private sector of higher education (2.1% against 1.8%), and unemployment among female graduates was persistently high during the five years after graduation. The average length of time to find a job was six months, but this varied according to public/private sector of higher education, disciplinary field of study and gender (ODES, 2002).

The national reports on the unemployed graduates (GPEARI, 2009b) point to a similar trend in the identification of a general profile of these unemployed people: 58% had graduated between 2005 and 2008, 72% were under 35 years of age, 69% were female and 40% came from the north of Portugal. These data reinforce the image that young adults, despite a higher education, are experiencing difficulties in finding a position in the labour market. Concerning the field of knowledge, it should be noticed that the highest unemployment rate (41%) is within the disciplinary domains that produce a greater number of graduates (41%), i.e. ‘managerial sciences’, ‘social and behaviour sciences’, ‘teacher training and educational sciences’.

The national reports show that in December 2008 higher education graduates were 9.1% of the total population registered as looking for a job in the country (GPEARI, 2009b). Also, it is stressed that only 4.1% of higher education graduates between 15 and 64 years old were unemployed. The report highlights that the number of higher education graduates unemployed had decreased between December 2007 and December 2008, while the same decrease was not found among graduates from other levels of schooling.

The surveys conducted by higher education institutions also highlighted the increasing number of graduates experiencing unemployment and insecure positions in the labour market. An analysis of those surveys showed that the time spent to find a job after graduation tended to become longer for graduates surveyed after 2000 compared with graduates surveyed in the 1990s. This can be taken as another indicator of the increasing difficulty for young higher education graduates to get into the job market. Concerning this trend, the studies in the Universities of Aveiro (Martins et al, 2002) and Lisbon (N. Alves, 2005) are of particular relevance since they have
been done twice (1997 and 2001 in Aveiro; 1999 and 2004 in Lisbon), allow for rigorous comparison of the situation and point in the same direction: there are increasing difficulties for young graduates in finding a job.

The surveys conducted by higher education institutions additionally showed high levels of student satisfaction concerning studies in higher education as a whole. Students were particularly satisfied with the overall scientific and pedagogical qualities, although they were less satisfied with the proximity between their academic studies and the world of work. There was a tendency that the majority of graduates would choose the same programme again (69% in Lisbon University for instance [N. Alves, 2005]).

In the context of the Bologna reform there are indications that students who have finished the first cycle are frequently (around 75% in Europe [EC, 2009b]) going on to the second cycle. It could be that, in Portugal, they are simultaneously registering in the Employment Centres as graduates of higher education looking for a job. If this so, this strategy has various implications that need to be monitored. One is that potentially the number of graduates registered as unemployed will increase very significantly, since they would only register after five years of higher education studies in the pre-Bologna period, but they now register after three years of studies. Another implication is that it potentially becomes more common for young people to combine studies in higher education with the search for a job and eventually with the development of a professional activity.

If we confirm these hypotheses, Bologna may give way to quite a change in the profile of higher education students and this will involve various challenges for teachers and institutions, as well as having an impact on employability.

Sweden

Before 2007 the enrolment rate in Swedish higher education was about 60% for women and about 40% for men. In Sweden the national reports (2003-2007) include statistics concerning the establishment in the labour market for those graduating in 2001-2005. Being ‘established’ in the labour market means being employed in a given month and having a minimum salary (for students surveyed in 2004 it was above 18,315 euros per year). These statistics show that the level of establishment depended more on the field of study than on length of study, i.e. 90% employment in medicine and health care, 80% in engineering and 50% in arts and sciences, but there were also differences between universities within the same subject area. The Swedish educational system, as well as the labour market, is gender segregated. About 25% of all students study in gender-balanced study programmes (HSV, 2005) while the two largest fields of education and work, the fields of health and care and engineering are gender segregated. In health and care 90% are females and in engineering 85% are male. The highest rates of establishment had students from professional programmes, i.e. engineering, medicine, psychology, law, and the lowest rates had students graduating from humanities and arts. About 65% of the female undergraduates worked within the public sector compared to about 30% of male students. Some 52% of the students graduating from a PhD programme worked within the field of education and research and 20% within health care.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV, 2008) showed that in 2005 the rate of establishment in the job market three years after graduation was higher for PhD students (82%) and undergraduate students (80%) than for students with only secondary education (49%). Graduate employability in Sweden is high, compared to the employability of students with secondary education, but at the same time graduate employability is highly correlated to the overall situation in the job market. A comparison was made with data from 2002, showing that establishment was higher in 2005 but this was due to a better overall situation in the job market. About 20% were defined as having an insecure or weak position in the job market. There are studies showing a tendency for casual jobs, projects and time limited on probation jobs to be increasingly frequent in the Swedish job market (Allvin, 2006).

Sweden has one of the highest unemployment rates for young adults in Europe. As there are no student fees and opportunities for all, even mature students, to get grants and loans, studying has become an activity that buffers unemployment rates and provides opportunities for financial support. The risk of credentialism, of ‘over-consumption’ of education and credentials is obvious.
More research is needed on this phenomenon in relation to employability and social inclusion and widening participation.

Higher education institutions have been criticised for not following up their graduates, and in 2002 all higher education institutions were surveyed in order to map if and how follow-ups were done and the results of these (HSV, 2004). Results showed that from 1997 to 2002 there had been local follow-up initiatives but that this work had not been done systematically or coordinated. Data about the transition from studies to work for engineers, nurses and economists was more elaborated than for other categories of students. The purposes of the follow-ups were mainly to evaluate the relevance of a study programme for the students’ professional career and reasons for drop-out.

In 2002 and 2007 student surveys were done (HSV, 2002, 2007) with the aim of investigating whether higher education contributes to students’ learning, personal development and citizenship as well as knowledge and skills. The results showed that about 90% were satisfied and that about 84% of the students would choose the same programme again. In 2007 more students said that their courses did not demand full-time study and 20% said that the demands were too low.

HSV has compiled some preliminary data on what has happened during the first ‘Bologna year’, 2007/2008. They will follow the development on a regular basis. One tendency is that students enrol in study programmes to a higher degree than before. Sweden has had a long tradition of adult and lifelong learning where students have studied courses free of charge, but this has changed. There was an increase of almost 100% of new students on bachelor programmes, and one explanation is that students are directed to study programmes with clear curricula, learning outcomes and a focus on employability, at the cost of free courses. Another explanation is that students register for bachelor programmes in order to be eligible for master level. In 2007 there was a huge interest among academic staff in starting new master programmes; 680 programmes were announced but only 460 could start due to a lack of interest from students. One surprise was that during the first ‘Bologna-year’ 61% of all new master students were international students. This was markedly so in engineering programmes. The explanation is that Sweden attracts international students because there are no tuition fees, many courses are taught in English and the study facilities are good. In bachelor programmes only 3% of the newcomers were international students. On the other hand, while in Europe 41% of students had never planned to study abroad, in Sweden there is a higher percentage of students (56%) in this situation (EC, 2009b).

Portugal and Sweden in the European Context

Portugal and Sweden are two small European countries where the level of education differs in relation to an average in the EU-27 countries. Sweden has a high level of people with tertiary education in all age groups while Portugal has a level of tertiary education below the average of the EU-27 countries. Data from Eurostat as well as national data show that there is a relation between employability and level of education in the population at large.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lower secondary and primary education</th>
<th>Upper secondary education</th>
<th>Tertiary education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 25-64</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU 27</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<td>Portugal</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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Table IV. Unemployment and level of education in the age group 25-65 years in 2008.

If we look at it this way the relationship seems obvious and in line with the human capital theory that investment in education pays off in job and career opportunities (Tomlinson, 2008). But the picture is more complicated if we relate this to aspects as gender and age. One explanation for the differences in unemployment among the group with tertiary education can be a statistical flaw. When the average unemployment rate in the whole population is measured the age-related issues are concealed. In Portugal it is the young adults who have the highest level of education, but also
the highest level of unemployment. In Sweden a high level of people aged 35-65 with tertiary education might conceal the fact that the unemployment rate among young adults with tertiary education is among the highest in Europe.

The Eurostat data, as well as the national data, is based on a definition of employability as being established in the job market and being employed. As we have noticed previously, this view can be contested following the contributions of some authors (for instance, Knight & York, 2004) and taking into account the fact that increasingly often graduates experience insecure positions in the labour market.

Another aspect that has to be considered is the general unemployment rate in different countries, but here it is also important to differentiate between structural variables, gender, age and education. In relation to our initial question, if Bologna is to make a difference for the employability of our students, we will argue that the global financial crisis and the overall situation in the labour market makes it difficult to anticipate the future, but one tendency is that it is becoming more difficult for young adults to get into the job market, and when the supply of a well-educated workforce increases employers redefine their employability criteria.

**What Will Change with Bologna?**

In this article two small European countries have been used as examples for analysing graduate employability in relation to the overall national employability and educational levels before the implementation of the Bologna structure, which did not start until 2007 in both countries. The question is if and what will change with Bologna and what are the challenges for higher education institutions, for academic staff and management?

First of all we have shown that the overall level of tertiary education is higher in Sweden compared to Portugal. This might be because of a longer and stronger tradition in Sweden of investment in education, of widening participation, adult education and free courses. When comparisons are made, within Europe, these differences among countries must be considered. We have also shown that Sweden has one of the highest levels of unemployment among young adults, despite a high educational level. This can be explained by the structure of the labour market and the social welfare system. Education as well as the labour market is highly gendered and the social welfare system makes it possible to study with no tuition fees and with student loans and grants available for all students, independent of family economy. We also conclude that students coming from families with lower educational level are more likely to study in higher education in Sweden than in Portugal, but in both countries it is obvious that well-educated parents are generating well-educated offspring.

If we return to the top three priorities for the next decade of the Bologna process (EC, 2009a), a focus on national targets for widening participation, lifelong learning as an integral part of higher education systems and the fostering of employability through the encouragement of work placements embedded in study programmes, we see that these were aspects with which students were most dissatisfied (Garcia-Aracil, 2009). These are also aspects that challenge traditional higher education systems with a focus on young adults with well-educated parents who are satisfied with traditional academic studies as long as this allows them to learn ‘employability skills’ out of class, in campus activities, with friends at work and in building networks for the future.

The data analysed in this article allows us to highlight some common features on employability of higher education graduates in both countries. One of these features is a common ‘pattern’ focusing on the way higher levels of education seem to be insurance against unemployment. The data available indicates that unemployment, as well as insecure positions in the job market, tend to be less common among graduates than among students with lower levels of education. However, this ‘pattern’ seems to be sensitive to general labour market strains and structures, as it is becoming increasingly difficult for young adults to get into the job market, despite higher levels of formal education.

Although we identified that ‘pattern’, it should be noticed that within the group of higher education graduates other variables such as gender, disciplinary domain of studies and higher education institution (whether it is private or public) do interfere with graduates’ employability. Additionally we stress that the study trajectory contributes to later professional career.
Preliminary data from Sweden (HSV, 2009) show that students search for structured study programmes, and not free courses, at bachelor level and that the interest for master programmes was high among academic staff and international students, but low among Swedish students. The consequences of this are difficult to anticipate, but the way higher education institutions approach these challenges will certainly make a difference.

Altogether, these findings contribute to a need to rethink graduate employability. It is not a straightforward link between formal educational programmes and learning outcomes and employment, career and job opportunities. Instead employability should be defined as the result of a complex set of different factors that interact with one another in diverse contexts. There are indications showing that education, and credits, are becoming a cultural capital that contributes to a growing gap between social groups in relation to gender, age and social background.

If aspects of the Bologna process, like the social dimension, the fostering of citizenship and democratic values are neglected, the consequences of the new structure might be unintended, i.e. increased exclusion and a situation where graduates are ’picking’ lower qualified jobs and thus contributing to the overall unemployment rates. Another unintended consequence can be ‘over-consumption’ of education and credits (Brown, 2003; Tomlinson, 2008).

Concerning the issue of students’ satisfaction with their higher education studies, we conclude that levels of satisfaction tend to be quite high in both countries. In the case of Portugal it is said that this is linked to a positive appreciation of the pedagogical and scientific elements of the learning trajectory of students but higher education is criticised for not being more clearly related to the world of work. In Sweden, even if students are quite satisfied with their education as a whole they state that contributions could be more significant to personal development and the development of citizenship.

So, what might Bologna change? Available data indicate that the number of students (many of them newcomers) in the first cycle has increased since 2007, but we still do not know if these students will graduate after three years and go out into the job market, or if they will continue to the second and third level. However, a recent survey indicates that three-quarters of students working towards a first degree say they want to continue their studies, either to a second cycle (master’s programme) or to find work and resume their studies later on a part-time basis (EC, 2009a).

Additionally, we may envisage some changes in the typical profile of higher education students in both countries. In Sweden, a high youth unemployment rate may encourage higher participation of younger people in higher education as an alternative to unemployment. The surprisingly high number of international master students in 2007-2008 might decrease as the government is considering tuition fees for non-European students. In Portugal young people enrol in higher education but they now might start looking for a job after three years of studies, i.e. by the end of the first cycle. On the other hand, some recent initiatives have tried to attract adults to continue their learning through studies in higher education. In both countries a great number of students (more than half, and this is above the average in the countries surveyed) never planned to study abroad.

Conclusions

In both Sweden and Portugal the big challenge seems to be how to meet the expectations and demands of young adults who have ’invested’ in tertiary education and to manage the emerging gaps between young adults with high and low levels of education. The consequences of Bologna will bring about different challenges in the various countries even if all over Europe these are not entirely a matter for the individual students’ career and opportunities for the future, but also for society. Does higher education prepare students for an insecure and flexible job market? Does higher education offer opportunities for lifelong learning aside from professional development and training? Our conclusions are in line with the ministers’ top three priorities for the next decade (EC, 2009a): the social dimension, making lifelong learning an integral part of higher education systems, and fostering employability. These three dimensions need equal attention when monitoring and evaluating the changes taking place within the framework of Bologna reform. Employability
cannot be understood as a concern exclusively with establishment in the labour market but has to be analysed and dealt with in the framework of these three interrelated dimensions.

Note

[1] Since September 2007 the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education has released four reports analysing the information on higher education graduates that are registered as unemployed in the Employment Centres. However, it should be noticed that usually only those who are entitled to an unemployment benefit register in those centres.

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ELINOR EDVARDSSON STIWNE is Associate Professor in Education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning (IBL) and Director of Linköping Centre for Teaching and Learning (CUL). Her research interests cover higher education, education and health and organisation and design of education. Correspondence: Elinor Edvardsson Stiwne, Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning (IBL), Linköping University, SE-581 83 Linköping, Sweden (elinor.edvardsson.stiwne@liu.se).

MARIANA GAIO ALVES is an Assistant Teacher and Researcher in Educational Sciences in FCT/UNL (Faculty of Sciences and Technology, Universidade Nova de Lisboa). Her research interests cover higher education, lifelong learning and transitions from education to work. Correspondence: Mariana Gaio Alves, UIED (Unidade de Investigação Educação e Desenvolvimento), Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Quinta da Torre, P-2825 114 Monte da Caparica, Portugal (mga@fct.unl.pt).